

Decision-Making Processes in Voluntary Football Clubs in Relation to External Counselling

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Introduction

Recruiting and retaining volunteers who are prepared to make a long-term commitment is a major problem for Swiss sports clubs. With the inclusion of external counselling for the change and systematisation of volunteer management, sports clubs have a possibility to develop and defuse problems in spite of existing barriers and gaps in knowledge. To what extent is external counselling for personnel problems effective? It is often observed that standardised counselling inputs lead to varying consequences for sports clubs. It can be assumed that external impulses are interpreted and transformed differently into the workings of the club. However, this cannot be solely attributed to the situational or structural conditions of the clubs. It is also important to consider the underlying decision-making processes of a club. According to Luhmann's organisational sociological considerations (2000), organisations (sports clubs) have to be viewed as social systems consisting of (communicated) decisions. This means that organisations are continually reproduced by decision-making processes. All other (observable) factors such as an organisation's goals, recruiting strategies, support schemes for volunteers etc., have to be seen as an outcome of the operation of prior organisational decisions. Therefore: *How do decision-making processes in sports clubs work in the context of the implementation of external counselling?*

Theoretical Framework

An examination of the actual situation in sports clubs shows that decisions frequently appear to be shaped by inconsistency, unexpected outcomes, and randomness (Amis & Slack, 2003). Therefore, it must be emphasised that these decisions cannot be analysed according to any rational decision-making model. Their specific structural characteristics only permit a limited degree of rationality – bounded rationality. Non-profit organisations in particular are shaped by a specific mode of decision-making that Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) have called the “garbage can model”. As sport clubs can also be conceived as “organised anarchies”, this model seems to offer an appropriate approach to understanding their practices and analysing their decision-making processes. The key concept in the garbage can model is the assumption that decision-making processes in organisations consist of four “streams”: (a) problems, (b) actors, (c) decision-making opportunities, and (d) solutions.

Method

Before presenting the method of the analysis of the decision-making processes in sports clubs, the external counselling will be described. The basis of the counselling is generated by a sports clubs' capability to change. Due to the specific structural characteristics and organisational principles, change processes in sports clubs often merge with barriers and restrictions. These need to be considered when developing counselling guidelines for a successful planning and realisation of change processes. Furthermore, important aspects of personnel management in sports clubs and especially volunteer management must be implied in order to elaborate key elements for the counselling to recruit new volunteers (e.g., approach, expectations). A counselling of four system-counselling workshops was conceptualised by considering these specific characteristics.

The decision-making processes in the sports clubs were analysed during the counselling and the implementation process. A case study is designed with the appropriate methodological approach for such explorative research. The approach adopted for these single case analyses was oriented toward the research program of behavioural decision-making theory (garbage can model). This posits that in-depth insights into organisational decision-making processes can only be gained through relevant case studies of existing organisational situations (Skille, 2013). Before, during and after the interven-

tion, questionnaires and guided interviews were conducted with the project teams of the twelve participating football clubs to assess the different components of the “streams” in the context of external counselling. These interviews have been analysed using content analysis following guidelines as formulated by Mayring (2010).

Results

The findings show that decision-making processes in football clubs occur differently in the context of external counselling. Different initial positions and problems are the triggers for these decision-making processes. Furthermore, the implementation of the solutions and the external counselling is highly dependent on the commitment of certain people as central players within the decision-making process. The importance of these relationships is confirmed by previous findings in regard to decision-making and change processes in sports clubs. The decision-making processes in sports clubs can be theoretically analysed using behavioural decision-making theory and the “garbage can model”. Bounded rationality characterises all “streams” of the decision-making processes. Moreover, the decision-making process of the football clubs can be well illustrated in the framework, and the interplay of the different dimensions illustrates the different decision-making practices within the football clubs.

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